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**“What happens to a dream deferred?”: a few thoughts on justice and redemption**

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What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore –  
and then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over –  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?  
Langston Hughes, *Harlem*

Anthony Grooms, a young African American novelist, was born in Virginia, like Thomas Jefferson. Grooms has grown up “in the shadow of Monticello”,<sup>1</sup> and has shown an early interest in the ideal of justice and in the ambiguities of its application. This interest has drawn the attention of critics and of the reading public.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Grooms’s work belongs to the long tradition of African American literature, which made race the main social justice issue already in the beginnings of the development of its novel, in mid-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This article will discuss two texts by Grooms: his novel *Bombingham* and his thoughts on justice in the introduction to his collection of short stories, *Trouble No More*. Before beginning to analyse his texts, however, it is necessary to evoke the cultural background his work

grows out of: namely, the philosophical principles on which American democracy was founded as well as the aporias accompanying the birth and the growth of the republic and undermining the issue of social justice.

Justice is one of the principles on which the United States has been founded. It means that ideally, the republic promised to offer fair and honourable treatment of all citizens, because its government respected the principles of moral rightness and equity. American society was to be based on reason, on God's law and on justice, the three being closely related. In the light of the Enlightenment philosophy, it was reasonable to base a social system on justice, for it permitted the country to flourish and its inhabitants to be happy. Justice was to be understood in terms of divine law, and it was the discrepancy between divine and human justice that was at the origin of the wish of the American colonists to sever the link with the British crown. Indeed, since they found the community they belonged to (as British subjects) unfair, they resolved to secede from this community, recognizing that an unfair community is not worth belonging to. These principles figure in the *Declaration of Independence*, which states that the aim of any government is to make sure that the citizens will not be deprived of their "unalienable rights", that is to say, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".<sup>4</sup> These three rights result from the natural, or divine, law, and are therefore due to each and every human being.<sup>5</sup>

But while God is the source of the rights that humans are supposed to enjoy, it is the duty of human beings to create social institutions which would see to the respect of these laws.<sup>6</sup> The government retains its right to call itself just only insofar as it seeks to satisfy human needs and to make sure that citizens can enjoy their unalienable rights—otherwise, citizens should seek to establish a new one, because the authority of any government does not stem from God but from the agreement of the citizens.<sup>7</sup> Just power results from the respect of these rules, their abandonment is a crime fully justifying the overthrow of the tyrannical government. Indeed, according to Benjamin Franklin, "'Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God'".<sup>8</sup> Or, in the words of Martin Luther King, who discusses justice in America in his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail", "law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and ... when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams

that block the flow of social progress".<sup>9</sup> Thus, the foundation of a just society is not the right to make profit, to consume or to expand the territory of the country, but rather the right to be safe from harm and to be happy. As Cottret says, the pursuit of happiness should not be confounded with hedonism; rather, it is related to the notion of hope. Thus, in the *Declaration of Independence*, the term happiness is closely linked to a good government and to the social virtue, it is not selfish and not individualistic.<sup>10</sup>

The contradiction existing between these noble principles of the republic and the reality which accepted the existence of slavery was one of the arguments used by Englishmen to criticize the project of American emancipation, already before the revolution.<sup>11</sup> It was also obviously pointed out by contemporary antislavery activists, who showed "the similarity between slavery and what the colonists saw as their own repression under England".<sup>12</sup> Indeed, already in one of the preliminary materials for the preparation of the *Declaration of Independence*, entitled *A Summary View of the Right of British America* (1774), which was extremely popular in the 1770s and circulated widely as an anonymous brochure, Thomas Jefferson listed the right to choose one's country and place of residence and the right to emigrate freely as unalienable rights of an individual.<sup>13</sup> To solve this discrepancy between theory and practice, Jefferson proposed to include in the *Declaration of Independence* a clause which accused the British king of having captivated and enslaved African people, an act which violated ""the most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him"". <sup>14</sup> However, the Southern delegates refused to see the clause included in the *Declaration*; and most of the delegates, Northerners included, agreed that it was too inflammatory. In this way, from the very outset, the American republic was burdened with ambiguities, as for decades to come the principles voiced in the founding act of the republic were violated on a daily basis. And if the *Declaration of Independence* states that for a very long time, the inhabitants of the thirteen colonies would unsuccessfully and humbly request that justice be done, only to be answered with repeated acts of injustice, the very same thing could be said about the repeated attempts of African Americans to be granted the right to pursue their happiness.

But in spite of his anti-slavery proposals, Jefferson's position towards the peculiar institution was not totally unambiguous. First of all, he did not manumit his slaves even though he did not approve of slavery. In fact, his "opposition to slavery always rested more on the harm it did to whites than on the harm it did to blacks", which is why over the years he became more and more determined to preserve the cohesion of the union by means of employing caution in the treatment of the peculiar institution.<sup>15</sup> In 1820, in a famous sentence, the Sage of Monticello stated: "We have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other".<sup>16</sup> Clearly, he judged that the state would perish and the Union be dissolved if justice were to be respected and slavery abolished. Thus, he recognized the incompatibility of the principles of divine justice and of the need of the government to retain its power. This resulted from the poor view he had of black people. While Jefferson claimed that all citizens are endowed with an inner sense of social justice, and that the people are not only the source of power, but should always have the means to control the ruling elite,<sup>17</sup> he did not seem to believe that blacks and whites were equals as far as their natural qualities went.<sup>18</sup>

As has been stated above, the issue of establishing justice in the country where different ethnic groups did not enjoy equal rights belongs to main themes in Anthony Grooms's fiction. According to Grooms, injustice permeates American history and the situation of the black community is not exceptional, for other groups have suffered persecution as well. In his list of the severe breaks with the ideal of justice, he includes Native American genocide, the Trail of Tears, and the Vietnam War, among others. Although in his work, he focuses on the era of the civil rights movement, on the involvement of the black community in it, and on the opposition between the black community and the American society at large, he does not claim that slavery (or segregation) weighs more than other well-known examples of injustice committed by Americans either on American soil or abroad.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, given the ideological foundations of the United States, miscarriages of justice and unfair treatment of certain groups inhabiting its territory draw more attention to

themselves and acquire a certain visibility. But on the whole, examples of injustice are numerous in American history.

This moral failure is all the more problematic as Americans entertain a collective vision of their messianic role in the world: the American project implies that the New World is to redeem the Old one, and that Americans “reproduce the biblical archetype of the chosen people”.<sup>20</sup> It may therefore be interesting to examine the Biblical view of justice and of its place in the world. Our modern idea that justice should prevail stems from archaic “thought of the cosmic order”, or *Ordnungsthematik* (a term used by Hans Heinrich Schmid<sup>21</sup>). This system of thought, underlying the Bible but not limited to it, states that three different levels of reality, the cosmic, the political and the judiciary, are interrelated. If the created world is well ordered, it is necessary to reproduce this order in the human realm in order to secure salvation. Justice of the government is thus linked to the functioning of nature, all orders being related and mutually dependent. In this way, social justice is in a way seen as being naturally bred out of creation, a state that can be expected, hoped for, and obtained. However, in spite of this seemingly optimistic perception of justice, it could also be said that the bond between the world and justice is dissolved, since the injustice of the universe is seen as a “massive, overwhelming fact” already in the Bible.<sup>22</sup> The universal justice may at first sight appear to result from the creation of the world, which is reassuring. But in fact, the whole system is fragile and subject to breeding injustices. For example, the very fact that there is a rule to break, a fruit not to be eaten in Paradise, implies that it is possible to break that rule: “la possibilité du mal paraît inscrite dans la structure éthique de la création”.<sup>23</sup> There seems to be a blatant discrepancy between “the order of the creation and the historic experience of evil”.<sup>24</sup>

In the preface to *Trouble No More*, Grooms mentions two important historical figures responsible for the shape the USA has achieved: Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King. These thinkers also influence his novel, especially its vision of justice. Jefferson, who authored *The Declaration of Independence* and laid the basis for the American dream, is accused of betraying the ideal of justice as far as the issue of slavery and the situation of blacks in the new republic are concerned. Grooms labels

him as one of America's "idealistic" yet "compromised" leaders. The famous "wolf by the ear" statement, expressing Jefferson's fears of the retaliation of freed slaves over masters, is identified as presenting false choices, for as Grooms says, freed slaves would be as interested as masters in self-preservation. Jefferson's failure to free his own slaves is presented as this statesman's great moral failure.<sup>25</sup>

King is praised for having proposed a model of redemption for the American nation. For Grooms, King's vision of "'The Beloved Community' in which people worked out their differences through non-violent and tolerant means that promoted reconciliation and redemption",<sup>26</sup> is the most important element of his intellectual legacy. The legacy of these two thinkers informs Grooms's short stories and *Bombingham*, his first novel. In particular, King's "Letter from Birmingham's City Jail" and the *Declaration of Independence* are important intertexts helping understand *Bombingham*.

Politics joins hands with religion when Grooms observes that unfairness is equated with sin, and consequently requires redemption. Evidently, this union of politics and religion is not unusual in the United States, for example, as Isabelle Richet observed, King claimed the "inclusion of the African Americans in the national community" on the basis of the republican values rather than religious criteria.<sup>27</sup> As Martin Luther King said, injustice invites separation between various social groups, and "sin is separation".<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the Bible insists on the need to include the outsiders (symbolized by the figures of the widow, the orphan and the foreigner) into the community, which is an example of the influence of love on justice: the principle of loving one's fellowman makes it important to erase the rituals of exclusion which may be seen as a part of any strong social bond.<sup>29</sup> King's encouragement to disobey segregation stems from religion and politics at the same time: he says: "I can urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong",<sup>30</sup> but he also defends the American project as the project of a country whose goal is freedom.<sup>31</sup> For Grooms, the reparation of injustice is a duty of all, victims included,<sup>32</sup> and the reconciliation is seen as the issue of conscience. Contrary to King, who expresses his conviction that justice and peace based on harmony shall prevail, Grooms sounds pessimistic when he says that even if

America has become more just than it used to be, “reparation and reconciliation are ... not likely to happen soon”. And because true happiness is impossible to achieve without redemption,<sup>33</sup> the American project is threatened by the history of injustice. The reader will find the same pessimism in *Bombingham*.

Grooms would be likely to agree with Ricoeur, who claims that it is more important, from a moral point of view, to show clearly the respective positions of the offender and of the victim and to establish the responsibility of each party concerned rather than to mete out punishment for the acts committed.<sup>34</sup> Thus, for Ricoeur, justice weighs more than punishment or even than the reparation of wrongs. A similar idea is expressed by Grooms. Indeed, he writes:

In any case of injustice, from misdemeanour to holocaust, the accused are brought to trial so that some semblance of truth might be established. But before there is reconciliation, there is reparation – legal repair. The guilty are sent to jail, the victims are compensated for their losses, in so much as that is possible. Then, it might be said that a redemption, a legal compensation, has been achieved. But this material reparation, whatever form it takes, is only a foundation for the redemption that matters, the spiritual redemption that is coupled with the national reconciliation.<sup>35</sup>

A community built on the logic of understanding of the faults of the aggressors is stronger than one whose only reaction to crime is punishing the criminals. The invitation to forgive the offender may be traced back to Christian (or rather Abrahamic, that is to say Muslim-cum-Christian-cum-Judaic) religious philosophy which has exerted such a large influence in the whole world, for instance by modifying the understanding of social relationships.<sup>36</sup> The spiritual dimension seems essential in the process of forgiving the crime and of re-establishing normal relationships between victims and aggressors.

The ability to pardon is closely associated with social ties: indeed, promise and pardon are acts that cannot be accomplished in solitude, and that are fully dependent on the presence of others.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, promise and pardon are mental acts which contribute to reinforcing the cohesion of society. By granting pardon to an aggressor, the victim recognizes that the offender is able to commit other acts than evil deeds.<sup>38</sup> The victim, and also society since forgiving is a social act, then start perceiving the

aggressor as a complex human being able to do both good and evil. Pardon enlarges the soul and enables us to notice what has so far been hidden. But for Grooms, this spiritual redemption goes hand in hand with material reparation, in so far as what is required in America is more real life equality. For Grooms, justice requires better educational opportunities and better health-care services: "The reconciliation ... knits together the racial divides, but it also knits together the class divide".<sup>39</sup> In fact, the spiritual and the material constantly reinforce each other.

The importance of maintaining the social ties is defended in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail":

Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. ... segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, segregation destroys both the individual and the collective, both human beings taken separately and groups of people. This severing of social ties is wrong from all possible points of view. The link between community and justice, and the impossibility and pointlessness of individual struggle for justice, figure in African American novel as early as the mid-nineteenth century. As Colleen O'Brien observed when speaking of *The Curse of Caste*, "if individuals only seek social justice on their own behalf, ... that justice is not social at all".<sup>41</sup>

The tension between a true adherence to morality, reason, justice and truth on the one hand and the administration of justice, law and order on the other is very present in *Bombingham*. In fact, the whole novel is a hymn to justice. The choice of setting, Birmingham, Alabama, 1963, is the first important indication of the role justice will occupy in the novel. *Bombingham* is set in the city that Martin Luther King called "the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States".<sup>42</sup> The plot of the novel takes place in the year when Black American citizens lost patience and decided to ask for immediate justice, making the word "now" one of the key words of the struggle.<sup>43</sup> The racial relationships in Birmingham in 1963, the year when the novel is set and when Martin Luther King served time in the Birmingham City Jail, have been



summed up thus in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”: “its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any city in this nation”.<sup>44</sup> All these elements are to be found in the plot of Grooms’s novel: the text gives numerous examples of daily humiliations of the black community and its members, focusing on police brutality although providing also a striking example of an unjust trial and a resulting miscarriage of justice. So, the text presents a notoriously unjust city situated in the country which proclaims itself to be the defender of justice and freedom for all.

Besides, certain parts of the plot of the novel are set during the Vietnam War, a notoriously unjust conflict which divided American public opinion and exacerbated the divide between various social groups. The mindless killing of innocent people, which in *Bombingham* is also reflected in the observation of similar violence in nature, is soul-destroying for the soldiers involved even if they survive the actual combat. In this way, the time and place of the story show Grooms’s commitment to the ideal of justice. It is interesting that Walter, who as a child suffered from segregation, should enlist in such an unjust conflict.

Thirdly, Walter, the character-narrator, keeps trying to write a letter which is supposed to inform the parents of his friend killed during the war of their son’s death, but in fact turns out to cover a number of philosophical issues, such as the nature of justice and the place of humans in an imperfect, unjust world. This letter is never finished and never sent. Walter’s failure to complete his letter or indeed, to write a letter that would fulfil its informative function shows his uncertainty about the way life should be lived in general and more specifically, the way a Black man’s life should be lived. The choice of the epistolary form links the novel formally to King’s “Letter”, for this novel is also created in prison, although the prison walls are invisible.

At the same time, Grooms’s novel could be labelled a *Bildungsroman* whose protagonist, Walter, learns to live with the surrounding injustice, to differentiate between various figures of authority and construct his own idea of what is just and fair. His construct is a failure at first, and he becomes “loose and lost”, a formula

which may imply the dissolution of his ties with his family and his community, but in the end he arguably gains some insight and manages to take some steps toward redemption, even if the ending of the novel is far from optimistic. *Bombingham* juxtaposes the voice of a young adult named Walter, who is a soldier in Vietnam and who cannot find his way in life, and the story of the same Walter as a child a few years earlier. There is a tension between the narration of the younger Walter's acts and their perception by the older Walter. This tension mirrors a deepened understanding of America, of course, but also reflects the tension between the just laws and the unjust ones.

To his credit, in his role of narrator, Walter is trying to be objective and impartial, even when he fails to be so as a character (there is a discrepancy between the judgments he expresses in his tale and the judgments his younger self made, his recalled behaviour). In telling the story of his childhood, he attempts to display neither the desire of vengeance nor any sort of indulgence, but instead tries to establish some measure of truth in his vision of the past. In this way, he approaches the paradigm of both a good historian and a good judge.<sup>45</sup> For instance, when describing the death of his dog Bingo, killed by a police dog, he shows the goodwill of the white police officer whose dog committed the act even though he was probably unaware of this good will at the time of the event, given the fact that Bingo's death caused him intense suffering. Besides, he also attempts to present an unbiased picture of his parents, which may in fact be even more difficult, given the intense emotional involvement.

In the end, the entire novel may be seen as the reparation of an omission. Indeed, before his death in combat, Haywood asked Walter to tell him what it was like to be in Birmingham in 1963, to see Martin Luther King and to participate in the demonstrations. At the time, Walter not only refused to talk about it, but actually denied having ever taken part in the struggle. So telling the story of his childhood involvement and of the things he witnessed, even if it is done after Haywood's death, is a way of repairing this refusal. In this way, Walter, as the narrator, keeps trying to establish justice and to be fair even though he does not believe in the possibility of creating a just world, or at least, of making America more just.

The sections of the novel which deal with the events of spring and summer 1963 are flashbacks depicting the narrator's memories of being confronted with various justice-related problems. First of all, Walter is faced with the realization of the incompatibility between American ideals and the surrounding reality. The novel offers a formal setting for reflecting upon this discrepancy, since Walter and his sister Josie attend the civil rights workshops for children, organized by the church activists, which aim at preparing the youth to fight for freedom: "We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom".<sup>46</sup> The organization of such workshops is discussed in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" where King defends the necessity to hold them because they enable the activists to go through the period of self-purification: "We started having workshops on non-violence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, 'Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?' 'Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?'" . Indeed, for King, there are four steps in non-violent campaigns: "(1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, (2) negotiation, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action".<sup>47</sup> Young Walter is witness to a number of injustices, goes through the process of self-purification and participates in direct action, in spite of his young age (he was eleven in 1963).

The first difficulty that he faces in his process of identity formation is linked to the ambiguity of the position of the black community in the United States, evoked above. Early on in the novel, as Walter is about to set out on his newspaper round, he spots an ad about Theophilus Eugene Bull Connor's electoral programme. Connor was running for mayor in spring 1963. The use of the personal pronoun "you", which is not all-inclusive, worries Walter: "The 'you', followed by an exclamation point, was further defined as 'the people of Birmingham'. Even then, we realized that 'you' did not include us—nor did the phrase 'people of Birmingham'".<sup>48</sup> Although on the surface, it seems that the candidate for the local elections is addressing the whole population, in fact he only courts the white voters. The city of Birmingham is divided, on purpose, and being kept that way, which weakens the whole community, excluding a part of its inhabitants and preventing them from contributing to the common good. The country in which certain citizens, whose skin happens to be

black, are not included in the definition of “people”, as even children are able to realize, suffers from the dissolution of the ideals of democracy.

Later on in the novel, attending a workshop organized by Rev. Timmons, Walter meditates on the failure of the American ideals. As an adult soldier, he recalls Rev. Timmons speaking about the role of courageous black soldiers in the war for independence, but also in the two World Wars. The point that the reverend is making is that black soldiers’ achievements go unrecognized, and that there is a blatant lack of equality between rewarding and remembering their service and that of their white counterparts. The example he selects to reinforce his argument is the different treatment received by two citizens of Birmingham who were the first to die in World War I and World War II, respectively:

Kelly Ingram was the first man from Birmingham to die in World War I. He was a white man and the black park was named for him. ‘Now, does anyone know the name of the first Birminghamian to die in World War II?’ No one knew. ‘Of course not, because he was *Negro*. His name was Julius Ellsberry. He died at Pearl Harbour, and we have asked that the city name a park in his honor. And we have asked. And we have asked. And we have asked, again.’ (p. 186)

This unfair treatment of black soldiers reminds young Walter that even though he knows his father was a soldier during World War II, this knowledge could not be converted into vivid images, and as a result, he never thought of his father as a hero. Given that all war heroes he had ever seen on photographs in textbooks or in the movies were white men, he internalized the image of black men as “potato peelers” (p. 187). What is even more troubling is that his own father, who could tell his son the truth, has obviously never done so for he has never talked about his war experience. In fact, the only occasion when he does so in the diegesis comes later on, when a white veteran accuses Carl of lying, an accusation that Carl seems to accept. Thus, black soldiers seem to suffer from low self-esteem, not trying to make their heroic acts known—but are they guilty of omission, or are they forced to be silent in order to survive and defend their families, like Carl?

Recalling his own childhood, Walter says: "at that time, the ideal that was most disturbing to me was the pursuit of happiness" (p. 187). While black men can become heroes, their heroic deeds are forgotten and they are denied recognition. Furthermore, there are certain occupations which are forbidden to black people, as even youthful Walter realizes: "I knew that even though my parents and my teachers said that any boy in America could grow up to be president, in their truest hearts, they didn't mean me" (p. 187). And yet, the pursuit of happiness, appearing in the Declaration of Independence, stems from natural law and as such should not even be questioned or open to discussion. According to God's law, all people are equal (p. 189). Grooms would agree with Jefferson that human conscience and God-given moral sense are superior to man-made rules of law: "Jim Crow isn't God's will, it's man's will, and man's will can be changed" (p. 191).<sup>49</sup> This notion dates back to the puritan ethic, which stated that God is the source and the origin of the social order.<sup>50</sup> Obviously, even as a child Walter realizes that this ideal of happiness is unattainable to him, which is expressed, for instance, in his incapacity to realize his childhood dream of becoming an astronaut or a scientist. This principle has in effect been broken due to the legacy of slavery: segregation. As a result, American democracy is flawed. This flaw finds its reflection in the discrepancy between professed ideals and actual behaviour, as well as in the perceived imperfection of divine law.

This failure of justice and of democracy is also exemplified by the recurring question of trust, and more specifically by the metaphor of policemen as shepherds of the flock. Not surprisingly, Bull Connor's police force and anti-demonstrators' brigades occupy a prominent place in the novel. As it is, they contributed greatly to the success of the demonstrations: "As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, Connor's violence served, "to subpoena the conscience of the nation." When everyone saw the terrible treatment that African-Americans received, they felt they must do something. This could not be happening in America to American citizens." ("Freedom: A History of US"). The novel introduces quite early the issue of trusting the police. When Walter is told off by a white stranger for having entered a segregated park, he tells Lamar's mother that his father might complain to the police, knowing full well this is not Carl's intention. Mrs Burrell is obviously disbelieving, and says so (p. 57). She

reacts by telling him a story about a boy who has been bitten by police dogs. Later on, a closer comparison is drawn between policemen and their dogs: "The police and dogs were the shepherds and we blacks were the sheep, parting to let the shepherds through and yet seeming to ignore them" (p. 117). This sentence brings to mind religious imagery with the picture of the good shepherd, but this positive reading is instantly undermined by the underlying comparison between German shepherds and Nazis, which evokes racially motivated genocide. Furthermore, black people are associated to cattle, as they were in slavery. Last but not least, sheep, which are most often white, are here black, which hints at the outcast, the outsider, owing to the expression "the black sheep of the family". Thus blacks are outsiders, always unwanted and strange, rejected because of their difference. Later on in the same scene, the demonstrators who are arrested are shown waiting for paddy wagons patiently, "like lambs to the slaughter" (p. 119). This reversal of the image of the good shepherd announces the issue of the problematic divine justice (see below).

The second difficulty faced by Walter is the choice of allegiance and coping with hypocritical behaviour of adults. Justice is personified in the novel by numerous figures of authority: God, father, mother, US constitution and American ideals, teachers, preachers, the police and the local government. All those figures require (constantly or occasionally, and in various ways) young Walter's allegiance, but they present different, sometimes opposing, points of view on what is just and on what it means to do the right thing. So, what allegiance should be chosen? In any case, as young Walter discovers, it should be an allegiance consistent with one's conscience. It is essential to find the truth and justice within one's own soul, otherwise an allegiance has no value. This conclusion comes close to the Emersonian principle of self-reliance, which invites man to live in harmony with the surrounding universe and cherish the spark of the divine present in every human being.<sup>51</sup> It is also akin to the Biblical principle of man's responsibility when faced with the evil in the world. Indeed, according to Old Testament *Weltanschauung*, a man is supposed to help God achieve the ultimate victory over evil through "Mitzvah", that is to say a just and good deed. Thus, a man should try to reduce the problems resulting from the "fragility of the created universe and the persistence of evil".<sup>52</sup> However, Walter's

predicament is precisely that he is precluded from living in any kind of harmony, as are all his loved ones, which makes it very difficult, if not out and out impossible, for him to become a just and good man, in spite of his efforts. One of the elements in the novel which hint at this lack of harmony is the constant presence of the trope of violating nature. As Martin Luther King put it, “a just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law”.<sup>53</sup> But, the problem with Birmingham as presented in the novel is precisely the break of harmony – in nature as in the community.

Many characters of the novel seem to have problems with behaving in a consistent way, which makes them appear hypocritical at times. Thus, reverend Timmons, who fights for civil rights, does not raise a finger to defend a Black woman assaulted at the railway station. The young Walter expresses his inability to understand the reverend’s behaviour, seeking clues in the older man’s face: “I looked at Reverend Timmons, his dark, round face full of relief. Why hadn’t he helped her? He was always saying we needed to go to jail for our rights, but he had told us to follow him if he walked out” (p. 198). He seems here more concerned about his own safety than about the fight for justice. The relief that young Walter observes on his face is brought about by the fact that no white official troubles him and his companions, which may appear quite selfish. This is the same reverend Timmons who, earlier in the novel, holds a passionate speech to Clara about the necessity to fight for justice in which he says, “we have to be courageous enough to let our children learn about their past so that they might change their future” and “too many of our people are just content to let things stay the way they are” (p. 152). Another example may be parents and teachers’ contradictory evaluation of white people: on the one hand, black adults tell their children that “in order to be good, we had to be *like* white children”, but on the other hand, they also say that “white people were unfair and mean” (p. 190). Thus, the subject of the following sentence is ambiguous, as it may be read as referring both to black adults and to white people: “they were hypocrites” (ibid.). At the same time, Walter tries to justify the others’ inconsistent behaviour because, in the course of his short life, he has grasped the idea that humans are fallible, and that therefore, in spite of their good intentions, they will fail.

A plea for the right to fail, motivated by the personal weakness typical of all human beings (p. 184-185, in a letter Walter writes from Vietnam) prepares the reader for the passage where Walter wonders how to choose the right authority (p. 190-191). This understanding, however, comes with age: as a child, Walter finds it very difficult to cope with the inconsistency and the lack of logic of the surrounding world.

If it is difficult for young Walter to understand the behaviour of the adults around him, which leads sometimes to a reflection and sometimes a rejection of their authority, it is even more difficult to fathom God's sense of justice. If human justice is imperfect, divine justice seems hardly better. Josie is the first character to voice doubts about God's fairness, for she finds it unjust that her mother should die (p. 80). But the central element which enables us to grasp the problem the characters have with trusting God's justice is the story of Clara's father.

Walter Lee was charged with raping a white woman and killing her sisters solely on the basis of having been accused by the surviving victim who later was unclear about his identity. He was spotted by that woman one day as he was walking down the street, arrested and kept in jail although he had an alibi for the time when the crimes were committed and although he did not fit the physical description made by the victim beforehand. In spite of strong evidence of his innocence, he was sentenced to death, a sentence later commuted to a life-long prison term. He died in prison three years later, even though his daughter Clara kept praying for his liberation. He suffered without having deserved it, what happened to him was unfair and is presented as both God and man's fault: indeed, God allowed it to happen and white lawyers authored the verdict. When Walter hears this story, he finds it "impossible" at first, then thinks that Walter Lee "must have been guilty" of something, and finally judges it was Lee's lack of luck that was the source of his demise, concluding "How do you come out from under a curse?" (p. 146). The curse here is the curse of caste, the curse of being born black in a segregated society. Clara herself does not lose her faith in God, although she modifies it. Indeed, her new credo could be summed up as "trust, but not hope" (p. 215). Walter does not share her faith, and is perplexed about God's agenda: "If it's not all right, how can it be God's will?" (p. 252). Note that Walter inherited his name after his grandfather, and



this act of naming, probably meant as a tribute to Clara's beloved father, includes her son in the curse. The reader is thus invited to see that he may face difficulties on his way to realizing the American dream.

Apart from Walter Lee's trial, illness and death in prison and from Clara's death from cancer, another example of God's injustice is Lamar's death. Walter's best friend is shot by anonymous white teenagers while riding a bike with Walter one summer day in 1963. In fact, it happens so quickly and without apparent reason that at the beginning, Walter does not even notice that his friend is even injured, let alone dead, so that when Lamar collapses it comes as a total surprise. In the end, Walter seems to come to the conclusion that there is no reason behind suffering or behind life's happenings in general (p. 171).

This preoccupation with God's justice and its relationship with God's love links *Bombingham* to Martin Luther King's legacy, for it is also one of the central themes of King's thought.<sup>54</sup> King voiced his belief in a God that was both loving and just, that would defend the victims of oppression and eventually bring them peace, a god who made hope possible and gave his children the strength to fight against evil.<sup>55</sup> King did not ignore the troubling issue of God's seeming failure in the light of human history, and yet remained hopeful, claiming in March 1965 that divine justice shall rule very soon, since no lie can live eternally.<sup>56</sup> Walter and his mother Clara, however, find it difficult to be optimistic under these circumstances. Clara, while keeping her faith, professes to have no hope, but only trust, stoically. Walter, on the other hand, could ask the question voiced in The Revelation of St. John the Divine: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6, 10). The strange answer the Book of Revelation gives to that inquiry is "and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled" (6, 11).

Even so, Clara's relationship with God is somewhat problematic, and it would be interesting to examine it in detail. God seems singularly unresponsive to Clara's prayers – or, if response there is, it defies her understanding and her acceptance. And while the reader might reasonably expect her to lose faith under these circumstances,

she does not. The crime perpetrated on her father is unpunished. So, it might be said that God is either unjust, or careless, or sleeping. For Clara, it is impossible to grasp the reasons why God allowed her father to die in prison, serving a sentence for someone else's crime. Arguably, perhaps this inability to understand that makes her remain a believer: as André LaCocque said, only religion can possibly "raise the absurd to the level of the sublime", turning it into something which may not be totally senseless.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, Clara may see her own illness as punishment meted out for her having failed to sacrifice her father willingly. Indeed, if with time she comes to see her father's death in terms of sacrifice imposed on her to check her fidelity, comparable to Isaac's sacrifice by Abraham, she failed by repeatedly asking God to save her father's life. Abraham, who did not hesitate to sacrifice his son, saw his fidelity rewarded because the child was saved; Clara, by her reluctance to accept her father's fate, was given the state of an orphan. Under certain circumstances, ethics may be suspended,<sup>58</sup> and believers should not expect their pleas for justice to be answered.

But, if neither God nor the government can be trusted to restore justice or even to take fair decisions in the first place, the question of doing the right thing acquires additional importance. The responsibility for creating a just and decent environment for everybody to live in is transferred to the simple citizens. On many occasions, young Walter reflects that it is his and his sister's duty to participate in the civil rights movement because their parents are unable to do so. The moral obligation to do what is just and to take one's parents' place in the struggle for freedom if they are not inclined or unable to participate in it themselves constitutes a central question in young Walter's life at a certain moment. He wonders if love and justice are contradictory, sees family unit as the basic unit of the community, stresses the importance of family ties and wonders about the relationship between obedience to God, parents and conscience.

In this light, the evolution of different characters' attitude toward the struggle for freedom acquires additional weight. In an unjust society whose god seems to be looking the other way and allow injustice to flourish, the individuals' role in

maintaining justice is all-important. Walter-narrator recalls various characters' attitudes towards active fight for justice. First of all, he is puzzled about his parents' divergent positions. Young Walter finds it sometimes difficult to understand the difference of opinion between his parents, who seem to follow the theory of the division of roles and spheres of activity developed by nineteenth-century preachers: indeed, his father is interested in politics and in public life, while his mother, even if she holds a job as a secretary, is mostly interested in religion and morality.<sup>59</sup> This division of spheres of interest gives rise to their respective position on the civil rights movement. Walter's father Carl claims not to be interested in it when he is contacted by an acquaintance seeking volunteers to march (*Bombingham*, 24), yet he wants to see Reverend King (p. 49, 50-51) and instructs his son in current events against his wife's wishes (p. 59). He may be a "bystander" (p. 117), but he is not indifferent. Walter's mother, on the other hand, unable to help with organizing due to her illness (p. 24), is definitely "not curious to see a troublemaker [King]" (p. 49-51) and does not approve of her children participating in the struggle.

Secondary characters exemplify various attitudes toward the ideal of defending social justice too. The most interesting example is Mrs Burrell, the mother of Walter's friend Lamar, who undergoes a thorough change of attitude, although the text seems to hint that this evolution stems more from her interest in one of the activists, Reverend Timmons, than from a change of heart. At the beginning, she is adamantly against the struggle, as shown in her argument with her neighbour Miss Thompson (p. 20). Later on, she supports it, allows her son Lamar to participate in workshops and marches, and even encourages Walter and his sister to join (see p. 57, 75, and 151). The children attending the workshops are shown to form a secret society of sorts (p. 189) and are praised by Reverend Timmons for their courage (p. 204). However, their motives may not always be pure: for instance, Lamar uses the struggle for self-aggrandizement (p. 146-147).

In conclusion, *Bombingham* and the preface to *Trouble No More* present a rather pessimistic picture of justice in the United States. The country is shown not to fulfil its promise of equality for all, and denies certain citizens the full right to pursue their

happiness. Hope is thus taken away from them, or they are made to give it up. This is what happens to Clara, for whom the abandonment of all hope is the rational act in her situation as a black woman. Even though *Bombingham* depicts the moment of triumphant march for freedom and even though the fight has brought improvements in the situation of African Americans, the novel offers a bleak vision of both the struggle for the civil rights and the American project as a whole. In the end, Walter stands alone in front of injustice, finding it extremely difficult to renew the lost ties with the community, which is reflected in his difficulty to complete the letter from Vietnam. He has become a soldier, like his father before him, but contrary to his father, he is fighting in an unjust war that is meaningless even to him. Killing enemies is accidental, and the enemy that we see him killing is hardly a threat. The energy of the struggle for freedom somehow dissipates in the course of the summer when his mother dies and his friend is shot. Now, Walter lives in a chaotic world which does not recognize the importance of justice. At the same time, however, he is conscious of the importance of the ideal of justice, which is reflected both in his trying to be an impartial teller of the past events and in the pain he feels because of the absence of justice.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Pearl A. McHaney, Foreword to *Trouble No More*, Kennesaw: Kennesaw State University Press, 2005, ix-xxi (xi).

<sup>2</sup> For example, his novel *Bombingham* has been selected as one of the texts to participate in the project "A More Perfect Union", organized by the Wisconsin Humanities Council, which aims to examine the notion of justice. The questions from the covering letter are: "How do we define justice as a nation? As individuals? What did the Founding Fathers mean when they wrote that government should "establish Justice?" How have the many struggles against injustice, and for justice, shaped our nation's history? When and how do we choose to stand up against injustice in our lives?" See [http://www.portalwisconsin.org/bf\\_justice\\_feature.cfm](http://www.portalwisconsin.org/bf_justice_feature.cfm) for more details.

<sup>3</sup> See Colleen O'Brien, "What the Dickens?: Intertextual Influence and the Inheritance of Virtue in Julia C. Collins's *The Curse of Caste, or, the Slave Bride*", *African American Review*, 40.4 (Winter 2006): 661-685 (679).

<sup>4</sup> See Deirdre Mullane, ed., *Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African American Writing*, New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1993, 34 and Bernard Cottret, *La Révolution Américaine*, Paris: Perrin, 2004, p. 339.

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- <sup>5</sup> See Libiszowska *Tomasz Jefferson*, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolinskich, 1984, p. 54. Of course, the definition of a human being has been the centre of the debate: the respect of the principles listed above depends on how this definition is restricted.
- <sup>6</sup> Isabelle Richet, *La religion aux Etats-Unis*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001, p. 101.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Libiszowska, *Tomasz Jefferson*, p. 59.
- <sup>9</sup> Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 638.
- <sup>10</sup> Cottret, *La Révolution Américaine*, p. 193.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 178-9.
- <sup>12</sup> Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 29.
- <sup>13</sup> Libiszowska, *Tomasz Jefferson*, p. 36.
- <sup>14</sup> Peter Kolchin. *American Slavery*. London: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 88, Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 29
- <sup>15</sup> Kolchin. *American Slavery*, p. 88.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 89.
- <sup>17</sup> Libiszowska, *Tomasz Jefferson*, p. 274.
- <sup>18</sup> Kolchin. *American Slavery*, p. 88.
- <sup>19</sup> Pearl A. McHaney, Foreword to *Trouble No More*, xxiii.
- <sup>20</sup> Cottret, *La Révolution Américaine*, p. 10-11 (my translation).
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in LaCoque et Ricoeur, *Penser la Bible*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1998, p. 88.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 96.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 91.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 90 (my translation).
- <sup>25</sup> Pearl A. McHaney, Foreword to *Trouble No More*, xxiv.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., xxvi.
- <sup>27</sup> *La religion aux Etats-Unis*, p. 120.
- <sup>28</sup> Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 637.
- <sup>29</sup> LaCoque et Ricoeur, *Penser la Bible*, p. 184.
- <sup>30</sup> Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 637.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 644.
- <sup>32</sup> Pearl A. McHaney, Foreword to *Trouble No More*, xxvii.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., xxx-xxxi.
- <sup>34</sup> *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000, p. 615.
- <sup>35</sup> Pearl A. McHaney, Foreword to *Trouble No More*, xxix.
- <sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, p. 606-607.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 632.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 642.
- <sup>39</sup> Pearl A. McHaney, Foreword to *Trouble No More*, xxx.
- <sup>40</sup> Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 637.
- <sup>41</sup> "What the Dickens?", p. 677.
- <sup>42</sup> Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 634.
- <sup>43</sup> Paul Eberhard, "La Marche de Washington: Témoignage", *Les cahiers protestants*, 5 (Octobre 1992) : 56-57 (56).
- <sup>44</sup> Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 634.
- <sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, pp. 414-415.
- <sup>46</sup> Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 644.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 634.
- <sup>48</sup> Anthony Grooms, *Bombingham*, New York: One World Ballantine Books, 2002, p. 16 (other references to this text are given as page numbers in brackets after the quotation).

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<sup>49</sup> See also Libiszowska, *Tomasz Jefferson*, p. 67.

<sup>50</sup> See Richet, *La religion aux Etats-Unis*, p. 95.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>52</sup> LaCoque et Ricoeur, *Penser la Bible*, p. 94.

<sup>53</sup> Mullane, *Crossing the Danger Water*, p. 637.

<sup>54</sup> Serge Molla, « Un homme qui dérange », *Les cahiers protestants* 5 (Octobre 1992) : 61-67 (61).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> LaCoque et Ricoeur, *Penser la Bible*, p. 151.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144-45.

<sup>59</sup> See Richet, *La religion aux Etats-Unis*, p. 80.